



Exploring Social Justice Through Music

By: Daniel C. Byrd and **Denise L. Levy**

Abstract

The concept of social justice is taught in many college courses across numerous disciplines, including social work, political philosophy, education, and psychology. According to Rawls (1999), social justice is “the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation” (p. 6). Finding ways of exploring social justice that are meaningful and engaging to students can present significant challenges for any instructor. While classroom activities often include readings, group discussions, videos, and a variety of evaluations, songs are often overlooked. Although the most useful instructional approach is one which always incorporates diverse teaching methods, this article focuses on the use of music.

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TEACHING TIPS

Exploring Social Justice Through Music

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The concept of social justice is taught in many college courses across numerous disciplines, including social work, political philosophy, education, and psychology. According to Rawls (1999), social justice is “the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation” (p. 6). Finding ways of exploring social justice that are meaningful and engaging to students can present significant challenges for any instructor. While classroom activities often include readings, group discussions, videos, and a variety of evaluations, songs are often overlooked. Although the most useful instructional approach is one which always incorporates diverse teaching methods, this article focuses on the use of music.



h authors of this article have taught courses where music was successfully integrated as a means to explore and understand social justice. Listening to songs supplemented other readings, discussions, and assignments. Levy used this approach in undergraduate social work courses on cultural competence and in graduate courses on social work practice with families. Byrd included music in undergraduate social studies education courses and a general education course for high school students taught at a summer enrichment program (Levy & Byrd, 2011). What follows is an overview of the reasons music can serve as a pathway to greater understanding of social justice and some practical guidelines for implementing this teaching method into your own classroom.

Rationale for Using Music

On average, people under 18 years old spend more than six hours per day interacting with or listening to media (Cahill, 2008). Of the most commonly used methods to communicate information, listening to music stands out as an almost daily occurrence in the lives of young adults. One only needs to walk around for a few minutes on most college or university campuses to see numerous people listening to music through their phones and other devices. The experience of listening to music can potentially shape an individual’s values, actions, and worldview. It can also be a powerful tool in the classroom (Levy & Byrd, 2011). Of course, listening to music does not guarantee that a student will automatically learn what an instructor intends to teach. In order to maximize the benefits that justice-oriented songs have to offer, instructors should carefully choose those that are best suited to their current classroom topics. A list of potential songs and some of the topics they address are included in Appendix A.

Compared to written texts and videos, listening to music offers a few potential advantages. First, most songs generally last no more than a few minutes. As such, you only have to devote a small portion of your class time to this activity. Students can easily listen to a song with minimal effort and without needing time outside of class to complete the task. Secondly, many songwriters are concise with their messages. When studying the lyrics of most songs, students only have to read a few verses. Not only can these passages be read in just a few minutes, but the messages are often easy


to remember as a result of being so succinct. As a mnemonic device, songs have also been shown to improve learning and memory performance (Thaut, Peterson, & McIntosh, 2005). Lastly, pairing an important message with enjoyable music can lead someone to listen to those ideas over and over, not because they have to, but because they actually want to.

Certainly music does not replace the value of books, articles, and videos. However, it does offer a worthwhile alternative to complement different ways of studying and understanding social justice. Similar to other media, the historical context of issues addressed in the songs you choose can be of particular importance as well. Songs can often serve as inspiration for students to examine aspects of social justice such as “accepting others, challenging discrimination, examining privilege, and rejecting violence” (Levy & Byrd, 2011, p. 64). Music can also introduce societal problems such as “poverty, racism, abuse, and addictions and such global issues as hunger, disease, and war” (White & McCormack, 2006, p. 122).

Teaching Suggestions

One of the keys to a transformative and meaningful classroom lesson is adequate preparation by the instructor. Although it may be much easier to play a song simply as something fun and different, taking the time to choose one that is relevant to a particular topic and planning a brief lesson around it will be much more effective for your students. The following suggestions are meant to be practical and easily accomplished so that your class will get the most out of your efforts to foster greater understanding of social justice.

How to Select Songs

 When selecting a song to play for your students, one of the first considerations should be whether or not it relates to the topic(s) you already plan to address in class. In addition to the inherent value of any particular song, its worth as a learning tool will be amplified when used in conjunction with other classroom assignments, discussions, etc. There is a surprisingly wide variety of songs which span many musical genres and address various social issues. Additionally, you are not limited to any specific era. Appendix A includes songs that are categorized as country, rap, rock, folk, R&B, and many others. These songs span many decades and artists. In short, ideas around social justice are plentiful. You simply have to select those that are best for your course. When used often, playing many different songs increases the likelihood of appealing to diverse musical tastes and therefore connecting with a larger number of students.

Printing Lyrics

An important aspect of using songs in your classroom is allowing students an opportunity to read, think about, and discuss the lyrics. Levy and Byrd (2011) printed the lyrics for songs used in their courses and distributed copies to students before playing any music (see a sample in Appendix B). Doing this provides students with an opportunity to read what the songwriter is attempting to communicate and reinforces those ideas when music is added. This can be especially beneficial if specific words are more difficult to understand while being sung. Lyrics address a wide range of justice-oriented subjects such as peace, affirming diversity, and alleviating poverty. For example, in the song “Everyday People”, Sly and the Family Stone sing about respecting and accepting all people regardless of difference:

There is a blue one who can't accept the green one

For living with a fat one trying to be a skinny one

*And different strokes for different folks
And so on and so on and*

*We got to live together
I am no better and neither are you
We are the same whatever we do*

Instructors can and should use song lyrics to initiate classroom discussions about these issues. With such a large collection of songs that address important topics, it is usually easy to find one pertaining to your lesson for the day. Instructors should consider any copyright issues when distributing lyrics.

When to listen/Atmosphere of Class

Many choices exist as to when songs should be played in class, and this decision depends in part on the structure of your lesson for any given day. Having said this, we find that devoting the last 10 or 15 minutes of class to a song generally works well and provides an enjoyable way to end the day. More importantly, our students also seem to agree. Since listening to songs is not often incorporated into non-music based courses, students see this as a fun way to learn and usually leave class with a sense of happiness. It is a good idea to set up the listening experience by explaining what song will be heard, providing some background on the artist/group, noting the historical context of the music, and distributing copies of the lyrics. A discussion relating the song to the content covered during that class period can be planned either before or after the song has been played. Sometimes dimming the lights in a classroom also helps students focus on the song rather than their surroundings. If you prefer, projecting the lyrics, pictures of the artist(s), videos of the artist(s) performing the song, or computer-generated visualizations at the front of your classroom can provide an additional component to the music.

Classroom equipment

As with any classroom technology, it is always wise to check your equipment well in advance of using it in class. Even though most computers can easily handle playing a CD, sometimes they are unwilling to cooperate at the very moment you need them most. So, make sure you can successfully access your song(s) before class. If you choose to burn your own CD, be certain that the classroom computer will recognize it. If not, sometimes you can simply find the song online or play it from the artists' websites.

Evaluation/Discussion

There are many ways to evaluate what your students learn from listening to music focused on social justice. We find that well-facilitated group discussions are especially beneficial in exposing students to diverse perspectives in a relatively small amount of time. They also provide the instructor with students' thoughts and integration of other ideas covered in the course. The relative success of a group discussion depends both on thoughtful prompting by the facilitator and meaningful contributions from the participants. In order to achieve this type of exchange, be sure to have a few good questions in mind that should elicit thoughtful responses (see Appendix B). Encourage students to build on each others' ideas and respect the contributions of everyone in your class.

Conclusion

Numerous musical genres provide classroom instructors with an extensive collection of songs focused on conceptions of social justice. Incorporating these songs into your lessons can serve as an enjoyable learning experience for your students. Given the importance of all that is associated with the topic of social justice, finding ways to better reach our students should continue being a top priority of all educators. With every person who better understands their own and others' basic human rights, we all move a little closer to a society based on justice and fairness for everyone.

Appendix

Appendix A: Examples of Songs. Copyright 2012 by The Trustees of Indiana University. Reproduced with permission from the *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (JoSoTL).

Artist	Song Title and Year	Main Topics (index below)	“Subdivision” (2007)
Ani Difranco	“Crime For Crime” (1995)		“‘tis of Thee” (1999)
			“Willing To Fight”
(1997)PA, P, R			
^ PA, P, R			
⌈ P			
PA, ABeastie Boys	“In A World Gone Mad” (2003)		
	“Right Right Now Now” (2005)PA, WP		
PA, R, WPBen Harper	“Better Way” (2006)A, PABlack Eyed Peas and Justin Timberlake		“Where Is The Love” (2003)A, P, R,
WPBob Dylan	“Blowin’ In The Wind” (1963)		
	“The Lonesome Death Of Hattie Carroll” (1964)		
	“The Times They Are A Changing” (1964)WP		
A, P, R			
PABob Marley	“Get Up Stand Up” (1973)		
	“One Love / People Get Ready” (1977)PA		
A, PACharles Neblett	“If You Miss Me At The Back Of The Bus” (1963)PA, P, R		Cat Stevens / Yusuf Islam
	“If You Want To Sing Out” (1984)		
	“Peace Train” (1976)PA		

PA, WPChristina Aguilera“Beautiful” (2002)A, SCountry Joe & The Fish“I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ To Die Rag” (1967)PA, WPCredence Clearwater Revival“Fortunate Son” (1969)P, WPDolly Parton“9 To 5” (1980)PA, S, WRDoobie Brothers“Takin’ It To The Streets” (1976)A, PA, PELvis Presley“If I Can Dream” (1968)A, PA, WPE. Y. “Yip” Harburg and Jay Gorney“Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?” (1931)PA, PGarth Brooks“We Shall Be Free” (1992)A, PA, P, RJJames Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson“Lift Every Voice And Sing” (1905)PA, RJJanet Jackson“Rhythm Nation” (1984)PA, P, RJohn Lennon / The Beatles“All You Need Is Love” (1967)

“I Don’t Wanna Be A Soldier” (1971)

“Imagine” (1971)

“Give Peace A Chance” (1969)

“Power To The People” (1971)

“Revolution 1” (1968)

“So This Is Christmas (War Is Over)” (1971)A, PA

WP

A, P, WP

WP

PA, P, S, WR

A, PA, WP

A, PA, P, R, WPKanye West“Don’t Look Down” (2010)PA, PLiving Colour“Open Letter (To A Landlord)” (1988)PA, PLupe Fiasco“Conflict Diamonds” (2006)PA, P, WPMichael Jackson“Black Or White” (1991)

“Man In The Mirror” (1988)PA, R, WP

PA, PNo Doubt“Just A Girl” (1995)PA, SPaul McCartney and Stevie Wonder“Ebony And Ivory” (1982)PA, RPete Seeger“We Shall Overcome” (1947)PA, RPhil Collins“Another Day In Paradise” (1989)PA, PPublic Enemy“Fight The Power” (1989)PA, RRay Stevens“Everything Is Beautiful” (1970)A, PA, RRobert Palmer“Every Kinda People” (1978)A, PA, P, RRod Stewart“The Killing Of Georgie” (1976)PA, HRun DMC“Proud To Be Black” (1986)PA, RScorpions“Wind of Change” (1990)PA, WPStevie Wonder“Happy Birthday” (1981)A, PA, RSly And The Family Stone“Everyday People” (1968)

“Thank You” (1969)A, PA

A, PASweet Honey In The Rock“Ella’s Song” (1983)PA, S, R, WPThe New Seekers“I’d Like To Teach The World To Sing” (1971)A, PA, WPThe O’Jays“Love Train” (1973)PA, WPThe Original Caste“One Tin Soldier” (1969)PA, WPWAR“Why Can’t We Be Friends” (1975)A, P, RWillie Nelson“A Peaceful Solution” (2007)

“Cowboys Are Frequently Secretly” (2006)PA, WP

PA, HWoody Guthrie“This Land Is Your Land” (1940)PA, WP

Index of Topics Covered

A Acceptance of All People

H Homophobia

PA Political Activism

P Poverty

R Racism

S Sexism

WP War and Peace

WP Workers’ Rights



Appendix B: Example of Handout. Copyright 2012 by The Trustees of Indiana University. Reproduced with permission in the *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (JoSoTL).

Imagine

In June of 1971, John Lennon recorded the song “Imagine” in just three takes (Fricke, 2002). A ballad for human rights, advocacy, and peace, “Imagine” continues to be relevant nearly 40 years later. Just a few years after the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, 1971 also included numerous historical events. China joined the United Nations, the Nasdaq stock index was born, the voting age was changed from 21 to 18, Walt Disney World opened, 60 percent of Americans were against the Vietnam War, Greenpeace was created, Charles Manson and three of his accomplices were found guilty and sentenced to death, Jim Morrison was found dead, Texas Instruments marketed its first pocket calculator, and popular musicians included the Doors, James Taylor, Michael Jackson, the Rolling Stones, the Who, and Janis Joplin (The People History, 2009).

*Imagine there’s no heaven
It’s easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...
Imagine there’s no countries
It isn’t hard to do*

*Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...
You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one
Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...
You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one*

Discussion Questions



How does knowing about the context in which the song was written influence your thoughts about the song's meaning?

- In thinking about specific lyrics of this song, what would society be like if these imagined goals were realized?
- Is this song still relevant for today's society? What are some additional lyrics or topics that could be added?
- Is the song encouraging us to simply imagine a better world or to actually do something to make the world a better place?
- What can we do in order to work towards the goals mentioned in the song?

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